



How to address problem behaviour

ECE resources

Problem behaviour can be understood as an adaptive behaviour for a situation a child finds challenging. It therefore has a purpose or a meaning, and can communicate what is going on for a child. Understanding problem behaviour and its purpose for the child requires knowledge of the child's social contexts (although certain behaviours may be prevalent only in one context). Challenges may also be attributed to periods of transition or particular stages of development.

How to support children with problem behaviour:

- **Talk with the child's family** and consider factors that contribute to the problem behaviour.
- **Spend one-to-one time with children** to get a sense of their positive qualities and to develop a trusting relationship.
- **Identify antecedents** (what happens prior to the behaviour) **and consequences** (what happens after the behaviour). Use observations and think about what the child may benefit from or avoid through the behaviour. Interventions that are based on such careful assessments have been found to result in speedy and significant improvements in problem behaviours.
- **Be proactive.** Identify ways to manage or eliminate the antecedent in order to prevent problem behaviour. Engage in self-review to consider environmental or practice changes that you can make. For example, you might rethink practices that seem to disengage children, such as lengthy mat times, provide more of a certain type of resource to reduce conflict, or eliminate or minimise wide-open spaces.
- **Teach and model a replacement behaviour** that will be more appropriate and that aligns with your setting's values and expectations, such as manipulating a small toy when children are struggling to inhibit natural impulses. Develop individual plans in partnership with parents for children to learn these. Use plenty of feedback and positive reinforcement such as acknowledgement to strengthen behaviours, even when children aren't entirely successful – it often takes considerable effort to change behaviours. Use pictorial prompts with younger children.
- **Calmly and intentionally respond to children**, using agreed strategies that are focused on guiding children rather than on punishing them. For example, you might quietly and calmly redirect children whose behaviour is escalating to another activity away from the source of conflict or stress, and help them engage.
- **Offer support for regulation, reflection and resettling** through 'time to calm down' or 'time in with an adult', rather than 'time out', which only isolates children. Later, when the child is calm, check on the child, comment positively on their re-engagement, and provide feedback and discuss strategies for managing stressful situations.
- **Offer carefully planned choices** to prevent children from engaging in negative behaviours, such as 'Do you need someone to show you where we wash our hands, or can you remember?'. Choice-making can be a particularly effective strategy for children who use problem behaviours to avoid participation in activities that they find difficult or uninteresting. Choice-making has been found to

reduce aggression, acting out and disruptive behaviours, and improve compliance, independence, motivation, initiative, and social skills.

- **Provide logical consequences**, for example, cleaning up after making a mess, or doing something to restore the relationship after upsetting another child. Keep consequences short and ensure they don't stigmatise the child. Give children a warning first, using a calm and neutral tone. Avoid punishment, which damages children's positive sense of identity and leads to mistrust in relationships, and negative social outcomes including problem behaviours such as running away or lying.
- **Give more attention to positive behaviours** than negative behaviours. Some negative behaviours can be effectively ignored, but ignoring problem behaviour can escalate behaviours which may become unsafe and require you to step in (thus strengthening the original behaviour). Try giving short, neutral messages about expectations for behaviour, minimising attention to the problem behaviours. For example, in a normal voice, describe the problem behaviour, explain why it's a problem, what the child should have done instead, and what will happen now.
- **Help other children understand how they should respond** to the challenging behaviour, and to understand these behaviours as part of learning social skills, to avoid negative social reputations for children with challenging behaviours.
- **Discuss problem behaviour with whānau**, sharing a view that the behaviour presents an opportunity to plan for a better day tomorrow, and ensuring that the child knows they will be welcomed the next day.
- **Be consistent.** Ensure that you and your team have collaborative and well-understood practices. Discuss approaches at meetings and provide support for each other. Provide written guidance on strategies and approaches.

What to do when children hurt each other

There are many reasons why children may seek to hurt each other. Infants may bite to soothe the pain of teething, or be seeking oral stimulation. Toddlers and older children may be seeking attention or control, defending themselves, imitating others or communicating that they are hungry or tired. In addition to the strategies above, you can help children to stop engaging in hurting behaviours by supporting children's verbal and non-verbal communication skills, regulatory skills, conflict resolution skills and use of strategies such as asking for help. It is also useful to examine ways to reduce stress for children, for example, in relation to transitions. Providing plenty of positive attention and giving feedback when children play well, or show self-control in resisting an impulse to hit out also helps children to resist the urge to engage in hurting behaviours.

A sequence for managing a situation in which a child is hurt by another:

- Move to be close to the child and at their level.
- Take a deep breath and calm yourself.
- Offer comfort and first aid support to the child who has been hurt.
- (For verbal children) Be genuinely interested in understanding what has happened, listening attentively and without judging or assigning blame. Summarise what children were feeling to validate and acknowledge their emotions.
- Make expectations clear. This might be as simple as 'no hitting'. Offer equal protection to both parties, using a statement such as 'I will not let you hurt Priya, and I will not let Priya hurt you'.

- Help the child who has hurt another understand how the person they have hurt is feeling, (appropriate consequences might involve listening to the hurt child explain how they are feeling), as well as their own feelings that led to the incident. This might help children to feel genuine remorse about hurting another. Make it clear that when anyone makes a mistake, they can remedy the situation and plan to act differently in the future.
- Encourage children to restore the relationship with the person they have hurt after the event, and perhaps after time to reflect. Children may not make an apology, but prefer to give a kind gesture instead. Acknowledge these attempts as socially positive behaviours.
- Agree what the child might do next time in a similar situation. Have high expectations that children will learn to manage their emotions and positive social behaviours in the future.
- Help the children return to play, whether separately or together. Observe for a while, and comment on positive behaviours.
- Discuss the incident with the family of the hurt child, emphasising the plans put in place for prevention.

Further reading

Dunlap, G., & Liso, D. (n.d.). Using choice and preference to promote improved behaviour. What Works Briefs, 15. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Retrieved from: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb15.html>

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Fox, L., & Duda, M. (n.d.). What are children trying to tell us? Assessing the function of their behaviour. What Works Briefs, 9. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Retrieved from: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/wwb9.html>

Ministry of Education (2019). He māpuna te tamaiti: Supporting social and emotional competence in early learning. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.

McLaughlin, T., Aspden, K., & Clarke, L. (2017). How do teachers support children's social-emotional competence? Strategies for teachers. *Early Childhood Folio*, 21(2), 21-27.

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